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POLICY ISSUES: COORDINATION AND COOPERATION WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE UNITED NATIONS, INCLUDING NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Inter-Agency Environment Coordination Group and system-wide strategy in the field of the environment

Note by the Executive Director

Summary

The present report has been prepared in accordance with Governing Council decisions 19/9 A of 7 February 1997 on the Inter-Agency Environment Coordination Group (IAEG) and 19/9 B of 7 February on the United Nations system-wide strategy in the field of the environment for the period 1998-2002, and briefly outlines developments with regard to those coordination and cooperation mechanisms since the last session of the Council

The United Nations Task Force on Environment and Human Settlements and the subsequent report of the Secretary-General on environment and human settlements to the fifty-third session of the General Assembly (A/53/463), reviewed current coordination arrangements and, inter alia, recommended improved inter-agency policy coherence and collaboration through the establishment of an Environment Management Group (EMG). EMG would replace IAEG, and it is proposed that it would be entrusted with, inter alia, creating a dynamic process for the review of planned activities and modification of goals and activities in the environment and human settlements area in the light of new knowledge, as opposed to producing a static system-wide environment programme. In view of this recommendation, which falls within the purview of recommendations for action at the secretariat level as proposed by the Secretary-General, and pending the establishment of EMG and consensus on its mandate and terms of reference, the Group would supersede IAEG and the need for a system-wide strategy in the field of the environment.

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Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to:

1. Take note of the present report of the Executive Director on developments related to the Inter-Agency Environment Coordination Group and the system-wide strategy in the field of the environment;

2. Take note of the recommendations contained in the report of the Secretary-General on environment and human settlements to establish an Environment Management Group;

3. Request the Executive Director to report to the Governing Council at its twenty-first session on the progress made in the establishment and activities of the proposed Environment Management Group, including its terms of reference and initial areas of concentration.

I. INTER-AGENCY ENVIRONMENT COORDINATION GROUP

1. Pursuant to Governing Council decision 19/9 A, the present report outlines developments relating to the Inter-Agency Environment Coordination Group (IAEG). In that decision, the Governing Council requested the Executive Director to report to its twentieth session on progress made in the work of IAEG, including the further refinement and focusing of its role and functioning, while taking into account recommendations of the General Assembly at its special session for the purpose of an overall review and appraisal of the implementation of Agenda 21, held from 23 to 27 June 1997.

2. IAEG, which evolved from the Environment Coordinating Board (ECB) and its successor, the Designated Officials on Environmental Matters (DOEM), was conceived as a mechanism to provide UNEP with an effective and strong coordinating role within the United Nations system on environmental matters. Since its inception in 1995, IAEG held two formal meetings, one of which was to finalize its terms of reference.

3. The Secretary-General, pursuant to action 12, on environment, habitat and sustainable development, contained in his report entitled "Renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform" (A/51/950) which was submitted to the General Assembly at its fifty-second session, established a Task Force on Environment and Human Settlements to prepare proposals on reforming and strengthening United Nations activities in the fields of environment and human settlements, in order to assist him in making recommendations to the General Assembly at its fifty-third session, including recommendations on coordination. The Task Force, chaired by the Executive Director of UNEP, was requested to review existing structures and arrangements through which environmental activities are carried out within the United Nations system and, in this work, to focus on the distinctive functions of policy, development of norms and standards, programme development and implementation and financing, as well as relationships amongst these functions. The Task Force was asked to evaluate the efficacy of existing structures and arrangements and to make recommendations for changes and improvements to optimize the United Nations environment and human settlements work. The report of the Task Force was presented to the Secretary-General on 15 June

1998 and the Secretary-General, having considered the recommendations contained therein, subsequently issued his report on environment and human settlements (A/53/463) to the General Assembly under agenda item 30, on United Nations reform: measures and proposals.

4. The Task Force, in its review of existing United Nations structures and arrangements in the field of the environment and human settlements, revealed that current activities are characterized by substantial overlaps, unrecognized linkages and gaps. Thus, the Task Force concluded that there was need for "a problem solving, results-oriented approach that enables the United Nations bodies and their partners to share information about their respective plans and activities; to inform and consult one another about proposed new initiatives; to contribute to a planning framework that permits the plans and activities of each participant to be reviewed within the framework of the whole range of activities being carried out by all participants; and to consult with each other with a view to developing an agreed set of priorities and on the measures through which each participating organization can best contribute to those priorities and achieve a more rational and cost-effective use of their respective capacities and resources" (A/53/463, annex, paragraph 21).

5. Accordingly, the Task Force recommended that, in order to meet these needs with respect to inter-agency linkages in the field of environment and human settlements, the Secretary-General should establish an Environmental Management Group (EMG) and that EMG should replace the existing Inter-Agency Environment Coordination Group (IAEG), which should be abolished.

6. Under section III of his report, on recommendations for action at the secretariat level, the Secretary-General puts forward the above Task Force recommendation for improved inter-agency policy coherence and collaboration through the establishment of EMG. It is envisaged that EMG would adopt a problem-solving, results-oriented and issue-management approach for achieving effective coordination and should work as a highly flexible mechanism, only meeting when required to address specific issues of importance and to integrate the knowledge available in the United Nations system.

7. The recommendation of the Task Force, which the Secretary-General puts forward in his report, contained a number of proposals for the role and functioning of EMG. It was recommended that EMG be chaired by the Executive Director of UNEP, and that it be supported by a secretariat that would draw on the existing substantive capacity of UNEP and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) (Habitat), and that the chair should report to the Secretary-General. EMG would include, as core members, the main United Nations entities concerned with environment and human settlements. Particular meetings would involve additional United Nations entities, financial institutions and organizations outside the United Nations that have experience and expertise relevant to the issues on the agenda, as observers where appropriate. EMG would be concerned with environment and human settlements issues in the context of the linkages between environment and development as defined at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and subsequently elaborated.

8. It was proposed that the most important goal of EMG should be to achieve effective coordination and joint action in key areas of the issue of environment and human settlements; assist intergovernmental bodies in that area, in particular the UNEP Governing Council and the Commission on Human Settlements, in the preparation of coordinated inputs to intergovernmental forums, notably the Commission on Sustainable Development. It was recommended that the Group report on an informational basis to ACC, and bring an environmental perspective into the work of the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD). EMG should establish time-bound task forces or working groups covering clusters of issues, in which representatives of the main institutions involved in a particular issue could work together quickly to solve important problems, such as the reconstituted Ecosystem Conservation Group. Furthermore, EMG should include convention secretariats among its participants when needed and should act to ensure that there are appropriate linkages among activities that occur under conventions and relevant activities elsewhere in the international system.

II. SYSTEM-WIDE STRATEGY IN THE FIELD OF THE ENVIRONMENT

9. Pursuant to Governing Council decision 19/9 B, the present report outlines developments relating to the United Nations system-wide strategy in the field of the environment for the period 1998-2002. In that decision, the Governing Council recognized the need for the further development of the strategy in accordance with the decision to be taken by the General Assembly at its 1997 special session for the purpose of an overall review and appraisal of the implementation of Agenda 21, and endorsed the view of the Executive Director that the strategy should have a flexible structure over the medium term and should allow for regular updating in view of the developments taking place in intergovernmental forums in the course of the life of the strategy. The Governing Council further emphasized that the strategy document should provide a clear framework for the discharge of the policy guidance and coordination role of the Governing Council, as well as a framework for future collaboration between UNEP and relevant organizations of the United Nations system. In the decision, the Council requested the Executive Director, in consultation with all relevant organizations of the United Nations system through IAEG, following the conclusion of the special session of the General Assembly, and to provide the finalized document to the Council at its twentieth session.

10. In this context, it may however be recalled that in the mid-term review of the second system-wide medium-term environment programme, it was concluded that, because the structure, centralized planning approaches, and varying programme cycles currently used by the organizations in the United Nations system that participate in system-wide medium-term environment programme are often not compatible with its programming cycle, implementation of the second system-wide medium-term environment programme has required special efforts and frequent adjustments. The United Nations system has implemented the second system-wide medium-term environment programme to the extent that activities have been carried out as envisaged by the participating agencies and organizations at the time the programme was formulated. Consequently, most of the activities of the United Nations system in the second system-wide medium-term environment programme are implemented through the approved programmes of the agencies' respective governing bodies, and not in response

to the system-wide medium-term environment programme. Accordingly, it was recognized that there are practical difficulties and inherent constraints in a medium-term planning document that is expected to include the entire United Nations system.

11. In appreciation of these difficulties and constraints, in its recommendation on inter-agency linkages, which the Secretary-General subsequently put forward in his report to the General Assembly, the Task Force considered the question of whether EMG should produce a single United Nations environmental programme similar to the former system-wide medium-term environment programme. The Task Force concluded that, in view of the fast-moving global trends, a static programme, no matter how frequently it is updated, is bound to lag behind real needs. The experience of the first and second system-wide medium-term environment programmes amply demonstrated that such documents lose their relevance after a short while, if they are not meant as programming tools endorsed by the governing bodies of each partner agency in the United Nations system. On modalities of implementation, the Task Force recommended that EMG should create a dynamic process for the review of planned activities and modification of goals and activities in the light of new knowledge. Subgroups of EMG may agree on sharply focused action plans as a means of coordinating actions at the programme level and allocating resources in the most effective manner.

III. CONCLUSIONS

12. These developments pursuant to the recommendations of the Task Force, with repercussions for both IAEG and the system-wide strategy in the field of environment, where presented orally by the UNEP secretariat to Subcommittee II of the Committee of Permanent Representatives to UNEP at its meeting on 7 July 1998.

13. The establishment of EMG, with the proposed role, inter alia, to create a dynamic process for the review of planned activities and modification of goals and activities in the light of new knowledge, falls within the purview of recommendations for action at the secretariat level. Accordingly, the Secretary-General, in this regard, will undertake consultations with ACC members, so as to ensure the full participation of the entire United Nations system, and to decide on the formal establishment of EMG. Thus, pending the establishment of EMG and consensus on its mandate and terms of reference, it is proposed that EMG would therefore supersede the need for IAEG and the system-wide strategy in the field of the environment. The coordination requirements of UNEP could therefore be effectively carried out through the implementation of the recommendation of the Task Force, as put forward in the report of the Secretary-General on environment and human settlements.